

Remembering Lynn Jackenheimer, one year later



By Irv Oslin T-G Staff Writer Published: July 6, 2013 4:00AM

A year has passed since Lynn A. Jackenheimer went missing while vacationing in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The 33-year-old Ashland woman's body was found 11 days later in Fresno, N.C. Her former boyfriend, Nathan J. Summerfield, is in Dare County Jail, awaiting trial for her murder.

On the anniversary of Jackenheimer's death, her mother, Lora Johnson, and daughter, Ciara Sheppard, now 14, talked about what they have been through and their efforts to keep alive the spirit of love and generosity that Jackenheimer embodied.

"Not seeing or hearing from her, it seems like more than a year," Johnson said. "It seems more like forever. The actual tragedy of it doesn't seem like it's been a year."

Family members have tried to come to terms with the tragedy through grief counseling.

"We all see somebody, some more than others," Johnson said. "We're not going as often. We were going a lot at first. We still go, we just go less."

Ciara takes comfort in knowing her mother would want her to be happy.

"She would love us to be happy and we are, but it's not really the same without her around here," she said. "It's so different and stuff. But if I didn't have friends and family, I don't really know what I'd do with my life. I have a lot of support, and I'm glad to have that."

Ciara is deeply concerned for her younger brother, Leland Summerfield.

"I look at my brother and think poor little boy, he doesn't understand anything," she said "He's only 4 and he doesn't know what's going on. Maybe we have our ups and downs and argue sometimes but, honestly, I love him so much."

Johnson enrolled him in preschool last year.

"We put him in there to be with other children and interact, and I think it has helped him," Johnson said. "That's something Lynn was planning on doing. They called us and said Lynn had checked on registering there, so she already had that ball in motion."

Ciara, for the most part, is doing well in middle school.

"In middle school, maybe I got picked on and betrayed and stuff but, still, I had a pretty good year, made some great friends and some great teachers," Ciara said. "I was showing my grade cards to my dad and he said that 'With all the stuff you've been through this year and got As and Bs, I'm so proud.' My family and friends are proud and I'm proud of myself, too."

Coping is a challenge for her.

"Usually in class I struggle about how it happened and think about what happened," Ciara said.

"Sometimes in reading class I just couldn't focus. But still I made some good friends, friends that stick up for me and were there and nice and fun to have around."

She holds on to memories of her last day with her mom, doing fun things in the Outer Banks and planning to go horseback riding the next day -- one of her favorite things.

"That was the last night I got to say goodnight to my mom and 'love you' and she said 'love you, too,' and I think I gave her a hug," Ciara said. "I wish I'd get to hear her say goodnight and I love you and stuff and now I don't get to hear that. It's so hard for me and Leland and Leland asks 'where's mommy?' "

It has helped having a friend who also lost her mother.

"She knows what I'm going through,"

Ciara said. "I'm glad I have someone who has gone through the same thing I'm going through so I can talk to them and communicate with them and they understand me."

Holding onto memories

Johnson also feels a lack of closure.

"I know that she is gone and I have a hard time saying 'died' or 'dead' or 'murdered.'" Johnson said. "It's hard to speak those words. I know she's gone, but I have still not come to grips with her never coming back. I don't understand that. ... We never had the closure. I know she's gone and I know she's not coming back, but I don't think I've come to grips with her death yet. It's a ton of emotions. It's very hard for me. I have to keep looking at pictures to remember. I don't remember her face.

"I think we can't fathom that because we never got to see her. We couldn't see her when she was found, we couldn't see her when she was here (for the funeral). It's hard because you need that for closure and we didn't have that. A lot of unanswered questions. There is not a minute of the day that she is not on my mind, only when I have to change my train of thought, but then it goes right back to her. And so, always thinking about her and always thinking about the situation and her and the future, it's always going. It doesn't shut down very much.

"I've always thought about if I lost my mom or lost my dad how I would deal with that and, in my thoughts, it was horrible. I don't think any parent thinks they are going to lose a child. You always think about it when they are in danger, but you just don't think it's ever going to happen, (you think) that they are going to outlive you. It's hard to come to grips with. I don't think that anyone can do anything to me from now until I die that will be worse than this. There's nothing that can be worse -- if I lose my job, nothing. I just look at things differently now."

Plan to attend trial

They are hoping the trial provides some closure -- and some answers. North Carolina authorities have told the family Summerfield's trial likely will begin in early spring 2014.

Family members plan to attend the trial.

"We're definitely going," Johnson said. "I don't think we'll be able to move forward until justice is served for her and we have some answers to some things that we still have questions about. It will bring a little closure. I'm not going to say it's going to bring a lot. It was too tragic.

"I think we have some answers, but there are some things we just don't understand. And we may not get any answers. But I'm sure, whether he (Summerfield) wants to answer them or not, we'll be privy to more information."

In the long run, Johnson feels that it's probably better that the trial will take place so long after Jackenheimer's death.

"I'm torn between whether I'm OK with it being so far apart," she said. "It will be going on two years before trial. I don't know if that is a good thing or whether it's just going to bring everything up again and cause more emotions. If it would have happened right away, emotionally I don't know if any of us was stable enough.

"We've been trying to get the kids healthy physically and mentally. That was the main concern for a long time. I don't know if we would have been ready then to go through all that. It's taken a year just to get us in a functional world mentally and get us just a little healthy."

Outer Banks support

The support they've received from all areas has helped. That includes Outer Banks Hotline, a domestic violence victims' advocacy group in North Carolina.

"I keep contact with Temple (Heggie), who is running that, and a few of the people who have contact with the Outer Banks Hotline," Johnson said. "There are people involved with the Hotline who have been in the same situation and stayed with us. I just had a call the other night from a lady who said she knew this was coming, a year was coming up. She lost her daughter also to domestic violence. She's been through the same thing, so she knows all about times and dates and moments and everything that hurts really bad."

Volunteers in North Carolina are helping to preserve the site where Jackenheimer's body was found.

"There are a handful of people who keep her site decorated and send us pictures," Johnson said. "They have a lot of tropical storms, so they go down there afterward and make sure that everything's intact and keep it looking good. It's a memorial site for her."

Outer Banks Hotline will be among the beneficiaries of a hog roast friends, family and others are having today. Jackenheimer's sister, Tasha Holland, traveled to the Outer Banks on Wednesday to pick up items donated for the hog roast.

"They've been working real hard down there, too, because part of the proceeds will go back to them," Johnson said. "They put on a huge memorial down there for Lynn (in August). They did a dove release ceremony. It was just an awesome thing. It was for domestic violence in memory of Lynn."

Hog roast part of healing

Johnson is thankful for those in North Carolina and in the Ashland and Mansfield areas who have donated and worked on preparations for today's hog roast.

Proceeds also will go to the Shop With a Cop program, Rape Crisis Domestic Violence Safe Haven of Ashland and Lynn's Angel Trees.

The Angel Trees project was started by Jackenheimer's family. It was funded by reward money donated to the family by the man who found her body.

"The kids and I and the family bought purple trees and took money, rolled it up and tied it onto trees with an angel on top, and sent one back to the Outer Banks Hotline," Johnson said. "And we adopted a couple families out of the shelter here. There was approximately six or seven other families we put money on the tree for, people we knew who were struggling."

She also praised Ashland Police Department's Shop With a Cop program, in which officers from local law enforcement agencies take children in need shopping for Christmas presents.

"Their first Christmas without their mom, they (Shop With a Cop volunteers) just came and got the kids and you wouldn't believe how happy they were, especially Leland," Johnson said. "It's an awesome program. Leland just loved Kim (Officer Mager)."

"I love her, too," Ciara said.

For the family, the hog roast is part of the healing.

"I think the benefit is good for us," Johnson said. "It keeps our minds busy. Not always, but some, and keeps her memory alive. We're trying to take something that, at this time last year, was so horrible and hard to deal with and maybe turn it into something good by giving to others, maybe save a life in the shelters or prevent somebody from going back (to an abusive relationship), or put a smile on children's faces.

"That's actually what Lynn loved doing. That's why it's called Christmas in July. It didn't matter to her how bad she was struggling at Christmas, if she heard of somebody else that was struggling, she would try to gather money, gifts and things for them. We're trying to turn our focus to doing something good and still honoring her memory."